ONE DEPLOYED SOLDIER'S PERSPECTIVE ON ARMY KNOWLEDGE ONLINE

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Changing a duty station is one of the few constants in today's Army. Whether a duty-station move, an exercise, or a deployment, each implies a requirement to gather one's things, package them for movement, and drag them to a new location. Finding available space is often a top consideration. For that reason, highly mobile soldiers regularly store e-mail addresses, frequently used Internet links, online references, and important documents on floppy disks. Unfortunately, these "digits on disks" are often left behind at an office computer while soldiers are at a training center rotation, left on a disk at home while soldiers are deploying, or saved on a Zip disk and tossed in a sealed box scheduled to arrive at a soldier's new quarters many weeks later. There is, however, a way to circumvent some of these challenges through a Web site most soldiers have already visited and about which all soldiers should know.

I'm referring to Army Knowledge Online (AKO) located at **http://www. us.army.mil**. AKO is the Army's solution to keeping important information readily available. Soldiers can use AKO to access e-mail, contact Army sites, and search the World Wide Web from its home page. This gateway to the Internet is easily accessible, easy to use, and travels well. It also largely resolves the problem of not having access to important data.

Having documents available when needed is a challenge, especially when deployed. As mentioned earlier, we typically save those needed files to a disk. Inevitably, one or more of those disks is misplaced or becomes corrupted. While in Afghanistan, I found that using floppy disks was particularly risky. The dust rendered most floppies useless after only a few days. Hard drives were also susceptible to corruption, as I learned firsthand. In a remote location, dust takes an incredible toll on automation equipment.

On AKO, a tab to the Knowledge Collaboration Center (KCC) allows soldiers to post documents to secure remote servers, thus eliminating the need to save files locally to a disk. Providing a place to share files with other AKO users ensured that I could keep important files like this article in a safe place that was accessible whenever and wherever I needed it. Storing files on a server that is always archived reduces the threat of lost or corrupted data. Also, by posting articles to the KCC, I was able to gather the input of others as I sought assistance and effectively ended the need to e-mail multiple versions of the text to multiple addresses.

As I deployed to Afghanistan, I soon came to realize that I had merely scratched the surface of AKO's potential. I found its ability to support communication one of its greatest strengths because AKO assists with the continuity soldiers lose when they pull up roots. In my recent experience, I learned I could share my AKO e-mail address with others to allow friends and co-workers to stay in touch long after I departed an old post.

Another useful benefit was the ability to set up AKO to automatically forward e-mails to other e-mail accounts. Associates who had my AKO address were able to drop a line to my AKO account and via the automatic forwarding feature, I received their messages at any address I chose. This was especially helpful because I find it more convenient to check a work e-mail account without going through the Internet. In effect, AKO provides a permanent e-mail address that will not change as a soldier's geographical location changes.

Digging a little deeper into AKO's capability, one can find a wealth of information. Without changing a single setting from the AKO home page, you can access a number of Army Web sites. I found the channels for Armywide announcements, Army news, and frequently used links most helpful. Each is updated regularly and linked directly to other sites of interest for most Army users. These and many other AKO features provide a quick way of staying current and relevant on the latest Army, DOD, and world information. Capitalizing on this service often seemed a well-suited replacement for newspapers that, if they arrived at all, lagged behind by days or weeks during deployment.

AKO also incorporates the ability to establish and save links to other Web sites. It is not, as some might believe, limited to Army links. Soldiers may have a preference for a specific search engine, a unit Web site, a news Web site, or an entertainment site and can build these links into personalized pages. A distinguishing characteristic, however, is that the links are not saved to the computer. By saving them to the AKO server instead of to a local hard drive, an individual has the links available at home, on temporary duty, or at a public computer. Some may even be able to log on in the field or while deployed.

Because not every soldier has direct access to a networked computer, access to AKO has yet to reach every level of the Army. However, I found tremendous potential for AKO's use by deployed soldiers. Its compilation of Army links puts everything from forms to field manuals and regulations just a few clicks away, reducing the number of hard-copy versions of those documents that units need to transport. AKO Chat provides soldiers an opportunity to work through issues in an informal, real-time fashion.

Without a doubt, AKO is a useful tool. Initiatives for future improvements, increasing interest from soldiers, and support from senior leadership will likely drive AKO forward. As these improvements occur and as AKO continues to develop, it will take center stage as a critical force multiplier for the Army. Army leaders need to embrace AKO, encourage others to use it, and work to make it better. The Army's soldiers need to just log on, where they'll find a world of possibilities to make their jobs easier.

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